Ethics of TV avatars: the ZOE AI case and the questions it opens

When an avatar has regular presence on broadcast television, what is asked of it and what is owed to it.

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TL;DR

The ZOE AI case on television opens concrete ethical questions: transparency with the audience, editorial responsibility, consent of human guests, conversational red lines. Transparency from the first minute is the only sustainable policy. Improvising is a recipe for serious problems.

> *"An avatar that appears on television without the audience knowing it is not innovation, it is deception. And it ends badly for everyone."*
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> **— Chris Meniw**

When we started developing ZOE as an avatar with regular media presence, we knew we would be opening questions the Latin American television industry had not had to face before. The **ethics of TV avatars** stops being a theoretical matter when a synthetic character interacts week after week with human hosts, opines on current events, and builds a relationship with the audience. Does the audience know it is an avatar? Does it matter that they know? Who is editorially responsible for what it says? Can it interview human guests? And if it says something defamatory? In this article, from the concrete experience of having thought through and faced these questions with ZOE, I share the ethical framework we adopted and why transparency from the first minute is the only really sustainable policy.

What ZOE is and why the debate matters

ZOE is an avatar with regular presence in TV productions that operates under clear human editorial direction, with deliberately constructed personality and explicit transparency about its synthetic nature. It is not deepfake, it is not impersonation: it is a synthetic character declared as such that interacts with humans on air. What we learned designing its operation is replicable to any similar format, and the Latin American industry will need this kind of framework soon.

Principle one: transparency from the first second

The audience has to know, without doubt, that they are watching a synthetic character. This includes explicit verbal declaration at the start of any new participation, permanent visual identification on screen (some clear marker), and public availability of information about the project. Any deliberate ambiguity crosses an ethical line that should not be crossed, and an audience that feels deceived generates reputational damage hard to reverse.

Principle two: clear human editorial responsibility

Behind an avatar there is always a human team that decides what it says, on which topics, with what criteria. That editorial responsibility has to be explicit and assumed by identifiable physical persons. It is not the avatar that opines: it is the editorial team that programs it. This means that if it says something problematic, legal and reputational responsibility falls on the human team, not on an abstract entity. This disciplines the operation and protects the integrity of the project.

Principle three: consent of human guests

When an avatar interacts with humans (hosts, guests, panelists), those humans have to know clearly what the avatar is and how it will behave. This is not just courtesy: it is respect for their professional

autonomy. An interviewed journalist has the right to know whether their interlocutor is human or synthetic before deciding how to conduct the conversation.

Principle four: conversational red lines

Four types of content a serious TV avatar should never produce. One, defamation of identifiable persons. Two, content that can be confused with truthful statements about facts the avatar cannot verify. Three, opinion on ongoing judicial cases. Four, recommendations requiring professional license (medical, legal, specific financial). These lines also exist for human journalists but the avatar requires reinforcing them with operational code, not just editorial will.

Principle five: the audience's right to know how it works

The audience has the right to understand how what they see is constructed. This means public availability of information about who produces the avatar, what kind of technical system it uses, how what it says is validated, and how feedback is processed. Opacity feeds distrust. Transparency builds legitimacy.

What is coming in LATAM TV industry

In the next 24-36 months we will see: more avatars in informational and entertainment formats, first serious ethical incidents generating public debate, first specific regulations from audiovisual regulators in some countries, and development of best-practice codes by producer associations. Projects with clear ethical framework from the start will navigate better. Those that improvise will generate avoidable damages.

Frequently Asked Questions

Does the audience really notice the difference between human and avatar?

Less and less in perceptual terms. The technical quality of advanced 2026 avatars makes it very difficult to distinguish visually and auditorily. That is why declarative transparency is so important: if perception is not enough to distinguish, information is the only remaining ethical guarantee.

Can an avatar generate psychological harm to a viewer who bonds with it?

It is a real risk, especially with vulnerable viewers (children, people with loneliness). That is why serious projects include explicit warnings, especially at program start, and deliberately avoid building manipulative emotional bonds with the audience. The line between television character and affective manipulation is thin.

Who should regulate the use of avatars on TV?

A combination of national audiovisual regulator, consumer protection body, and industry self-regulation via professional codes. Hard-only regulation risks slowing legitimate innovation. Self-regulation alone risks capture. The balanced combination is healthiest.

Can an avatar be a public figure with the right of reply if criticized?

Today no as its own entity: the reply corresponds to the human team behind. In the future, this could be one of the functional questions the legal framework has to resolve. For now, the correct path is that any criticism of the avatar is understood as criticism of the human project that sustains it.

About the author

Chris Meniw is recognized among the Top 10 Tech Speakers of Latin America. Creator of Industry 6.0, Agentic Era, Agentic Economy, Education 6.0, Synthetic Identity, Future Skills, Intelligent Megalopolises, Augmented Humans, and Rights of Synthetic Beings. Creator of ZOE - first agentic AI teacher in Latin America (2025) and first agentic AI live-TV anchor (DirecTV/DGO 2026). Certified Trainer SEP-CONOCER Mexico (EC0076). UN Ambassador for Peace via UPF (ECOSOC) since 2018. 160+ international conferences in 14 countries. chrismeniwfoundation.org - info@chrismeniwfoundation.org

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